

Lincoln vs. Douglas Debate: A Fight For Basic Human Rights

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Equality is the state in which there is the same quantity or measure, value, or status. For thousand of years black and other minorities have been thought to be less than whites because of the color of their skin. However, in the Declaration of Independence, it states that all men are created equal and deserve certain unalienable rights. During 1858, Illinois senatorial candidates, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas, traveled to seven different locations to debate over topics, the main one being slavery. On Saturday, September 18, 1858, around twelve thousand people gathered in Charleston, Illinois, to listen as Lincoln and Douglas gave their opinion on this and several other topics. Slavery was an issue heavily debated all over the country. The crowd was in favor of Lincoln going into the debate due to his relations to the town in earlier years. This was important for Lincoln because he was not very well known except in some parts of Illinois. Although he did not win the senate election, the nation started to give him the political attention that he deserved.

Lincoln admitted that while he disagreed with slavery, he did not feel that black equality could ever be truly achieved and was not fighting for it. He simply wanted it to be observed that blacks deserved the basic human rights that the United States had originally fought and were recognized in the Declaration of Independence. Douglas' opinions were a lot different. Lincoln began by telling the crowd very simply what his thoughts on slavery were: "I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality between the white and black races. . ." Lincoln

realized that there would always be barriers between blacks and whites and talked very little about the fight for rights of blacks. He turned his attentions to producing evidence that Douglas and other Democrats were fighting for slavery, which could not happen in the United States. Lincoln's idea was that "the Union cannot exist half slave and half free. . . ." Lincoln knew that the question of slavery could only be answered with all of the states, or none. By living in a divided nation there could never be peace among the states. Lincoln spent the rest of his hour-long speech exposing Douglas and his attempt to force a slave constitution on the state of Kansas against their consent. He showed the crowd proof of what Douglas had been trying to do with a bill in his hand. The crowd erupted in applause when he was done speaking which made it evident that more than two-thirds of the people present were in favor of Lincoln.

The Democratic Party had taken a stance on slavery by saying, "they rejected blacks' basic humanity and blacks could never be American citizens. . . ." The Republicans took that idea and created their main argument against it. Douglas agreed with the statement whole-heartedly and stated, "I say that this government was established on the white basis. It was made by white men, for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever, and never should be administered by any except white men." He denied the accusations that Lincoln had made against him and told the crowd that Lincoln was just bringing up these issues in an attempt to divert attention from himself. The crowd could not be swayed though, and Douglas spent the rest of his allotted time rehashing previous statements he had made in other debates. His speech disappointed many of his followers and those in favor of him. Lincoln continued his triumph with his rebuttal. The debate ended with Lincoln's rebuttal and the roar of cheers for him. It was

obvious that Lincoln had won the debate. Douglas' recapitulation of previous speeches won him no more support, and it showed that the ultimate strength lay within Abraham Lincoln.

Although little known throughout Illinois, he was no stranger to the area around Charleston. Eight miles south of the town was the home of his father and stepmother, Thomas and Sarah Lincoln. Because his father had died a few years earlier, Lincoln had been making frequent visits to the cabin to help his stepmother care for the place. By being around the people of Charleston beforehand helped him gain their support before the debate had even started. The Charleston debate also proved to the audience that if the United States was not brought together under a single idea, then it would eventually fall apart. The United States needed leaders that expressed their ideas and followed through with them, which was something Abraham Lincoln was able to do in that speech and the others. The Charleston debate helped Lincoln gain the attention he needed by the nation in order to further his political career. [From Paul M. Angle, *Created Equal?*; Nancy Easter-Shick and Bonnie B. Clark, *Life in Downtown Charleston, Illinois 1830-1998*; Orlando B. Ficklin, "The Fourth Joint Debate Between Lincoln and Douglas," *Rockford Republican*, Oct. 10, 1858; J. Harding, ed., "Lincoln and Douglas at Charleston," *Prairie Beacon News* Sept. 24, 1858; Harold Holzer, *The Lincoln-Douglas Debates*; R. D. Monroe, "Debating Douglas on the National Stage, 1857-1858." 2000. Northern Illinois University <<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/biography7.html>> (Sept. 3, 2007); John T. Morton, "Lincoln and Douglas at Charleston," *Quincy Daily Whig and Republican*. Sept. 23, 1858; and S. E. Thomas, *The Teachers College Bulletin*.]